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The Devastating Impact of Gender Discrimination on Shared Parental Leave in the UK

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Abstract: This research explores the impact of gender discrimination in the workplace on the uptake of shared parental leave (SPL). It highlights how continuous gender discrimination in the workplace is negatively impacting the take-up of SPL. While SPL aimed to drive gender equality, very little success has been recorded. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty mothers and fathers who had a child (ren) on or after the 5th of April 2015 to understand how decades of gender inequality in the workplace might have impacted their decisions on SPL. The study found that the slow impact SPL is having on gender equality is due to the nature of the policy and the support available in the workplace. All the participants were generally excited about SPL and their interest in SPL, workplace practices, and support were key to their decision on SPL. However, there were still experiences of discrimination in the workplace. Participants felt that policies on SPL were complex and difficult to understand and needed employers' support to understand how it would work. Some of the participants felt that they were well supported by their employers, and they could benefit from the policy, others felt unsupported. Some of the participants explained that while their employers enhance maternity pay, SPL pay was not enhanced disincentivising them from benefiting from the SPL policy. Some of the fathers interviewed were concerned about the potential impact SPL may have on their careers or what their employers and colleagues may think about them.

Keywords: Shared Parental Leave, Gender Discrimination, Gender Equality, Parents, Employers

1. Introduction

This article contributes to the debate on how to achieve gender equality in the workplace and at home. The paper focuses on SPL policy in the UK and how decades of gender discrimination in the workplace could impact uptake. The UK Coalition Government in 2013, introduced the policy on SPL as a key initiative to increase gender equality in the workplace and drive change around the division of labour at home [1]. The policy allows mothers to share their maternity leave with their partners in the form of SPL [2]. This research offers a comprehensive explanation of why parents may be reluctant to take SPL and identifies interventions that the workplace can engage with to encourage the uptake of SPL. The research also makes recommendations for policy changes that could encourage engagement from women and men, challenge cultural norms and promote gender equality.

Since the introduction of the SPL policy in 2015, uptake has been low [3]. Limited academic literature exists on the subject.

The existing literature examines challenges to the policy, but none has specifically considered the role that decades of gender inequality and discrimination may have on the uptake of SPL. SPL represents a policy milestone in promoting gender equality, explicitly aiming to provide both parents with greater choice and flexibility [4]. Atkinson [5] argued that the policy was incapable of forging gender equality in the workplace. The level of awareness about the existence of the policy remains significantly low amongst parents [6]. The barriers to the effectiveness of the policy include low uptake [7], financial cost, mothers' desire not to share [8], the complexity of the policy, poor communication at work [3] and lack of support for fathers [9]. This study adds to the body of literature on the subject but most importantly fills the gap using rich qualitative data from mothers and fathers to help understand how decades of gender discrimination influence their decision on taking SPL. This paper is divided into four sections. It begins by briefly exploring gender discrimination in the workplace and some legal policies that lend themselves

to gender discrimination. Methods used in the study will be explained before moving on to the findings of the study and discussion, then concluding with some possible recommendations.

2. Background to the Study

Generations of gender discrimination against women in the workplace have severely restricted women's aspirations and opportunities. It has harmed women's self-esteem and capabilities [10]. While more women enter the labour force and are gaining power and presence in the labour market, gender inequality in the workplace persists. Gender is a social construct that outlines the roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a particular society believes are appropriate for men and women [11]. The adoption of these roles creates gender inequities — the differences that now exist between men and women systematically favouring one group to the detriment of the other [12]. While gender equality has received a lot of public and social attention in the last decade, gender inequality persists in the workplace [13].

The growth of women entering the labour force has been steadily increasing in the UK with about 72% of women aged 16-64 employed by June 2020 [14]. Despite this increase, women are still paid less than their male counterparts [14] and concentrated in lower skilled or lower-paid jobs [15] and subjected to gender-based discrimination [16]. However, Vokić et al. [17] found that highly educated women suffer less from inequality in the workplace although they have their own experiences of discrimination. While gender stereotype is demotivational for women, employers are losing out on a key talent pool. Gender discrimination is worse for pregnant women as they are perceived by employers as less committed and less competent [18; 19]. Pregnancy discrimination is found to be prevalent in most workplaces [20]. Women in the workplace are faced with discrimination, gender stereotypes, domination of men in senior executive positions, which all harm the woman's career progress and ambitions [21]. Women have gone through centuries of gender discrimination simply because of women's unique biological ability to bear children [18]. This uniqueness has however, worked against women when it comes to working and taking up positions in the workplace. The default position for decades, defined women's responsibilities as childbearing and caregiving while men were considered the breadwinners of the family [22]. This exposes the longstanding patriarchal belief that women cannot be good at being workers and mothers [23]. Employers view pregnancy as being outside the priorities and goals of the organisation [24].

There exists a wide range of research to evidence gender discrimination in the workplace [25]. While women struggle to break down the barriers and boundaries of discrimination and gender stereotype, employers remain generally unsupportive. Employers consider the cost associated with women being on maternity leave, time is taken off for antenatal classes, the difficulty in arranging workload or hiring and training someone to cover the maternity leave as an

unnecessary inconvenience [21]. This negative treatment has caused women to develop a negative perception about support in the workplace with an impact on whether they could ask employers for support when pregnant [25].

In 2005 the UK's Equal Opportunities Commission conducted a study into new and expectant mothers in the workplace and found that half of the pregnant women reported some form of disadvantage due to pregnancy-related issues [26]. The report found that women were dismissed within minutes or days of informing their employers that they were pregnant. Women were demoted after the employer learned of their pregnancy or just after they returned from maternity leave. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in 2016 conducted a study related to maternity discrimination. The findings of that study demonstrated that 27% (n=3034) of employers felt pregnancy put an unreasonable cost burden on the workplace, 17% believed that pregnant women and mothers were less interested in career progression and promotion than other employees and 7% did not think mothers returning from maternity leave were as committed as other members of their team. The study also found that 77% (n=3254) of mothers had experienced some form of discrimination during pregnancy, maternity leave, or after their return from maternity leave and 11% felt forced to leave their jobs.

While there are laws in the UK against gender, pregnancy and maternity discrimination, loopholes in legal provisions make it easy for gender discrimination in the workplace to persist. The Equality Act 2010 (Gender Pay Gap Information) Regulations 2017 was a missed opportunity to address gender discrimination by pay because the Regulation only required employers with 250 or more employees to publish a pay gap which is not enough to forge gender equality in the workplace. The Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination of all forms in the workplace. Sex (s11), pregnancy and maternity (s4) are listed as protected characteristics under the Act. Employers are not allowed to discriminate directly (s13), or indirectly (s19), or harass (s26) or victimise (s27) anyone based on their gender or pregnancy and maternity. However, Burton (2014) argued that the Equality Act missed the opportunity to address gender inequality issues in the workplace as she pointed out that neoliberalism prevented the Act from having a genuinely transformative effect. Furthermore, provisions on maternity leave and paternity leave in the UK mirrors these gender stereotypes. Support for maternity leave was first introduced in the UK in 1948 [27] while it was not until 1999 that fathers were given the right to 13 weeks unpaid parental leave which was later increased to 26 weeks with the introduction of Additional Paternity Leave in 2011. While the leave for fathers was unpaid, many fathers did not take the leave because financially they would have taken a pay cut for the duration of the leave since the leave was unpaid [28]. Mothers in the UK are currently entitled to a total of 52 weeks of maternity leave of which 39 weeks are paid at 90% of their average weekly earnings for the first six weeks and statutory rate (currently £151.97 or 90% of their average weekly

earnings – whichever is lower) for the remaining 33 weeks. Fathers get two weeks of paid paternity leave. While mothers need more time to recover from the changes that their bodies go through during pregnancy and childbirth, the discrepancy in the length of leave supports gender stereotype norms. Paternity leave policy offers no incentive for fathers to get involved in the caring responsibilities. Mothers are more likely to have their request for flexible working granted, but there are growing concerns about fathers being refused flexible working requests [29]. Although more fathers are spending time on childcare [30] and experiencing work-family conflicts [31], the workplace continues to operate predominantly on the male breadwinner model.

The gender pay gap provides further evidence of gender inequalities in the workplace with women earning 15.5% lower than men across the UK [32]. The gender pay gap is most obvious when women start bearing children because caring responsibility tends to affect mothers' employment rate and hours of paid work done [33]. Due to gender stereotypes, it remains unusual for fathers to take extended leave in the UK as workplaces are yet to embrace and encourage fathers to take extended leave [34].

3. Data and Method

This article addresses a key barrier to the uptake of SPL and adds to the body of literature in this area. To understand how gender discrimination in the workplace affects parents' decisions on SPL 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve mothers and eight fathers with an average age of 32. The sample size was determined using code and meaning saturation sampling [35]. Most of the codes were identified in the first two interviews and by the 16th interview, no new insights were being identified from the interviews. Interviews were stopped after the 20th participant on the grounds of saturation. Interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis and recorded for transcription. Each interview lasted on average 50 minutes. This method was appropriate because the aspects under investigation could not be studied in any other form than participants' experiences. The method allows participants to provide in-depth personal experience on the subject. Ethical approval for the study was received from the university and all participants consented to take part in the study. All the participants interviewed had had a child on or after the 5th of April 2015 when the shared parental leave policy came into force. Participants were recruited through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. All the participants were in full-time employment when their child/children were born to ensure eligibility for shared parental leave. Participants were from varied social backgrounds. Nine participants were educated to a master's degree level and above, seven were educated to degree level and four had A level certificates. Participants worked in different sectors such as health, education, hospitality, retail, and marketing, etc, and worked in organisations of varied sizes. Most of the participants were first-time parents, but three had two

children. All the participants were married or in a civil partnership at the time of the interview. The gross annual income of the participants was: 4 participants earning £40,000 and above, 8 earning £30,000-39,999, 6 earning £20,000-29,000 and 2 earning £19,999 or less. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data [36]. The coding of the themes was closely related to the aim of the study. Two interview transcripts were used to generate initial codes and identify emerging themes. The themes were studied and reviewed to ensure that hidden themes and alternative interpretations were accounted for. The codes were confirmed and applied to the rest of the interview analysis. This approach enriched the analysis for the research. The findings of this study are illustrated by quotes from the transcripts explaining the impact of gender discrimination on the uptake of SPL.

4. Findings

Several barriers were identified which contribute to gender inequality in the workplace and how it impacts SPL take-up. These are discussed with possible interventions that could help eliminate or minimise the barriers.

4.1. Workplace Support

Employers not notifying staff of the existence of SPL

In line with some of the existing literature [6], many parents reported not knowing that SPL exists and that the employer did not bring it to their attention when notified of their intention to take leave. As a mother of two, who did not take SPL, explained:

Yes, I went to HR, who referred me back to my manager. So, it was a bit of a rubbish situation. But at that point, that is when I just took to online, because a lot of our policies are on the intranet, so I read it up. But shared maternity leave was never really mentioned by them.

Employers unable to explain the policy to the staff

Some of the parents reported that they had heard about SPL from the news but found it frustrating when their employers were unable to explain the policy and its practicality. Without explanation and understanding, parents decided not to consider SPL as a beneficial option. As a first-time mother who did not take SPL explained:

They were not very helpful, even to do with maternity leave, let alone more complicated shared parental leave.

The complexity of the policy

Many of the parents reported that the policy was very difficult to understand and would have benefited from someone in the HR department explaining the policy and its practicality to them.

It has been far too vague, the policy. So, they've announced it's possible, I had no idea that you could mix and match it yourself and come up with your own patterns and your own suggestions, and I think HR departments have announced that they're engaging in it, but the information for us stopped there. There was no other practical information that we could grab hold of. So I think working examples

would be useful, and acknowledging some of the practicalities, the issues, the pros and cons, things to be mindful of, ways you might get around them, finding examples of people who've done it and then maybe getting them to do a case study, even just a testimonial on the website that you can read so that you can actually see how somebody's done it in practice. But for me, all I knew was there is shared parental leave, it is possible, but I didn't understand, financially, how it worked, what the different patterns were, and then it was me that was sort of thinking it through and thinking, "oh, hang on a minute, what will we do about this and what will we do about feeding them, what will we do about various different issues?"

Employers with no policy on SPL

Some parents reported that their workplaces did not have a policy on SPL, which to them meant that SPL is not on offer. As a mother of 2, who did not take SPL, explained:

I've never seen a full policy at my work on shared parental leave.

4.2. Financial Cost

Many of the parents reported that they could not take SPL because mothers' maternity leave pay tends to be very generous while SPL is paid at the basic rate. For many, taking SPL would mean taking a pay cut which will not be enough for them to continue paying for their essential bills. In most cases, the mothers pointed out clearly that the fathers were earning more than them which made it easier on that basis for them to take all the maternity leave while the father stays at work.

My husband earns significantly more than I do, so it made no sense for him to take the cut in his wages. My understanding of shared parental leave is that you get the 90% for a certain amount of time and then it switches to the statutory parental leave, which is £139.00 or something, a hundred and something pounds per week, and there is no way that we could have survived on my husband bringing in £139.00 per week. Even if I had gone back to work full time, which I have not done, we would not have been able to carry on paying our mortgage and paying our bills and things. He had to earn what he earns.

4.3. Fathers More Concerned About Work

Some of the parents reported that fathers were more concerned about their careers and the impact they might have because of taking SPL. A father of one considered SPL to be a luxury he could not afford because he was concerned about working hard to please or prove himself to his employer that he is a committed and hardworking member of staff.

I think it was because I did not know there was a specific policy within the company, and I felt that I had to put my head down and work hard to show the team what I was going to do and that asking for more parental leave would have been like a luxury that I did not have.

Some fathers expressed the fact that they would not be able to stay away from work for more than a month. The idea of

SPL or staying at home to bond with the baby simply does not resonate with them. They see themselves more in the traditional perception of being the breadwinner of the family and the mother the caregiver and they would struggle to move away from that perception. As explained by a father of two who did not take SPL:

Honestly, I do not think it's something I've ever thought of taking more than a month off work, I don't think that shared parental leave would have been something I would have been interested in. It was not something I was keen on. So apart from work, I do not think I would have been up to do that. I do not know, maybe because I have never been away from work for more than two weeks, so I'm just thinking being away six months I'd just feel like, I don't know, would I miss some training, or would I have lost some skills? Those thoughts are just in my head.

4.4. Continuation of Maternity Discrimination in the Workplace

Some of the mothers reported being discriminated against in the workplace because they were pregnant. The discrimination ranged from bullying to refusal to offer them a position on the basis that they were pregnant and would be going on maternity leave. As a mother of one, who did not take SPL, explained:

I remember many days that I did not want to come at all to work and I didn't really want to avoid attending so many meetings with these high-profile staff attending, because constantly during the meetings, when you walk in the corridor, people remind you that you are pregnant, as if this is something very unusual, this is something that shouldn't be... I could say that was very hard. For instance, even if you laugh in a meeting, they will say "oh X, don't laugh so much, you are pregnant, don't forget." I know I am pregnant, I cannot hide, so...many times I didn't want to attend any meetings, I didn't want to come to work at all.

A mother of two explained how she was refused an opportunity at work because she was pregnant and would be going on maternity leave:

When I was six or seven months pregnant, we had an email go around work saying, "I'd like a volunteer to be on a subcommittee in the workplace for this particular challenge." And I emailed back "oh yes, very interested, I particularly like this rapid up and coming area, very interested." I got the reply back "well, we're not really interested in you, you're going on maternity leave."

Some of the mothers reported that knowledge of negative treatment that women who are pregnant or go on maternity leave are subjected to in the workplace caused them not to disclose their pregnancy when they should especially if they were applying for promotion.

Yes, so I found the policy once I knew I was pregnant, but I hadn't disclosed to my workplace regarding the pregnancy at that point in time, and that was for a personal reason of going for, essentially, promotion, and I didn't feel the need to disclose my pregnancy at that point in time knowing what other women have been through.

4.5. Cultural Perception of Men as Breadwinners and Women as Caregivers

Some of the parents reported that the culture of men being regarded as breadwinners of the family and women as caregivers, is still very strong in the workplace and there are still men who consider caring responsibilities as the woman's responsibility and had no interest in taking SPL, as explained by a mother of one who did not take SPL:

My husband would never consider sharing that responsibility with me, because for him, that is my responsibility, to take care of her when the baby was born. He does not have the idea of sharing it, giving up his work and sitting at home and looking after it, that is not possible whatsoever.

Some mothers reported that they did not want to share their maternity leave with their partners simply because they considered that as their time to bond with the baby. This is partly driven by the cultural and societal perception that the mother takes maternity leave, and the father goes to work. Many of the women in the UK still take all their maternity leave themselves and it is not yet common knowledge and practice that some women do and can go back to work early.

But equally then when we looked at whether we could swap, once the baby arrived, I was very reluctant to do that. You know, you have this wonderful child and you have no idea how you're going to feel about them, and it's amazing, and I thought I don't want to go back to work after nine months, and as much as I wanted my partner to be involved, for me to have to go back to work so that he has three months in the end, I don't want to do that. I want as much time as possible.

Some fathers found it difficult to take SPL because the mothers did not want to share their maternity leave. This is because the SPL policy makes mothers gatekeepers to the sharing of the leave by requiring a mother to consent to sharing her maternity leave before a father can take SPL. This means that no matter how interested a father is in taking SPL, they may not be able to do so if the mother does not want to share the leave. Consequently, driving gender stereotypes of men being the breadwinners of the family and mothers the caregivers. As a father of two who did not take SPL explained:

I wanted to bond with my newborn child, but staying at home, that would not have been an option, because from the outset my wife had said she was going to be home for a year. So, it was not something that I was looking for as well.

4.6. Desire to Break Cultural Perception

Some mothers were excited at the opportunity that SPL is providing regarding steps to achieving gender equality in the workplace. As explained by a mother of one who did not take SPL, there was a sigh of relief that employers can start to treat men and women equally in the workplace because men will be able to take longer than two weeks on parental leave.

I remember being pleased because I often think about the position of women in the workplace and the rights of working mums, and I was pleased, and I also felt that when people employ a woman of a certain age they might be thinking "oh,

are you going to be off..." and I thought "oh that's a good thing", when I saw it on the news because it might mean people thinking, "actually, if I employ a man, he can take 50 weeks off, and actually there is no difference between whom I'm employing and not employing.

Some mothers reported the desire to return to work early from maternity leave to continue with their work and not lose out on key training, promotional opportunities, or a chance to contribute to changes at work. For these mothers, SPL would have been welcomed if they had information about it and how it works, and if SPL pay were better than what it is currently is as explained by a mother of one who did not take SPL:

Yes, I would have had much more control of my work than I have at the moment because so many things have been changed when I was away and I have to follow this up now, even if I don't agree with some of them, because now I'm told it's too late, you can't change it now. It is too late, you can change it next year but this year it is too late, you cannot do anything now. Had I been in a couple of months earlier I would have had still the chance to change some of the things that I wanted to change.

Some of the mothers reported taking SPL and returning to work early which enabled them to continue with their work without any interruptions. For these women, they are very happy to break the cultural perception of fathers being the breadwinner and the mother the caregiver. It also means that while these mothers returned to work early after taking SPL, their parents took a longer leave than two weeks to spend time and bond with the baby at home. A mother of two explained:

I am a career-driven person and having any more time off than the four months that I had off, I think I would have been quite far behind in my job. I'm a teacher and I've got quite a few responsibilities at work, so I don't think I'd have wanted to take much more time than that.

5. Discussion

The research was aimed at investigating how decades of gender discrimination in the workplace could have impacted the uptake of SPL.

While most workplaces still operate on a very gender-specific normative modeling, any attempt at achieving equality in the workplace and at home would always be faced with radical challenges. The rationale of SPL is to allow the mother to share some of her maternity leave with her partner and return to work early after birth, while the partner uses some of that leave to bond with the baby. While there have been key challenges with the SPL policy due to its complexity and the poor financial incentives, workplace practices and norms contribute to these challenges by not supporting parents who may want to take SPL. For decades, women have been discriminated against in the workplace because of their ability to have and care for children.

The findings of this study demonstrate that most workplaces are still very reluctant to actively embrace and encourage parents to take SPL. Some workplaces still do not have a policy on SPL or have not taken any steps to make the

policy accessible to their staff or are unable to explain the policy to the staff when asked. Parents find the SPL policy difficult to understand because of its complex nature (the fact that it's a sharing of the mothers' maternity leave instead of an independent leave for mothers and fathers; mothers having to consent before a father can take shared parental leave; engaging two employers in the negotiation, etc.) and require the support of the employer to understand the policy and its practicalities. The lack of support from the employer gives the parents the perception that the employer does not want particularly the fathers to take the leave. Furthermore, most workplaces still provide generous maternity pay for the mother with little or no support for fathers taking paternity leave or SPL supporting the suggestion by Burnett et. al. [37] that fathers are often 'ghosts' at work. While SPL is all about the mother sharing her maternity leave with the father of the baby, it would have been beneficial if the employers (who already enhance maternity leave pay) could enhance paternity leave pay and SPL pay to promote gender equality.

The findings also demonstrated that men were more concerned about their careers than taking SPL and considered childcare responsibilities as the duties of the mother. While some men are interested in taking time off work to spend with the family, most of the men still put their careers first before the family. This is especially true in cases where they are the main/highest earner in the family [38]. They would not want to take a financial cut to be able to spend time with the family because they would still be expected to provide for the family financially. While this is a reason identified by Whitehouse et. al., [39], Kaufman [28] found that fathers used financial cost as a reason even if they are earning less than the mothers. While this is true for some fathers, others are simply not interested in taking time off. Some of the fathers even think that taking SPL is a luxury they cannot afford because they think their employer will look at them to be less serious or committed to their work [40]. This reaction from men is driven by cultural and societal perceptions that men should be at work and not at home with the babies. Furthermore, workplace practices and norms continue to force men to concentrate on work rather than family [41]. However, the dynamics change in cases where the mother is the breadwinner of the family. Depending on the financial situation of the family, the mother may be more willing to take little time on maternity leave allowing the father to take most of the time on SPL. Although there is a growing number of women now being the breadwinner of their families, men are still predominantly the breadwinners in their families with most workplaces set up on that model.

As highlighted by the findings, maternity discrimination continues to be an issue in the workplace [21]. Women are discriminated against simply because they are pregnant and will be going on maternity leave at some point. This tends to make some women anxious when they need to notify their employer that they are pregnant. Some of the women if expecting a promotion or applying for a promotion tend to delay informing their employers about their pregnancy until they know about their position. This is especially/even more

detrimental because employers are expected to conduct risk assessments with expectant mothers at work to ensure that the work environment and the work they do is suitable and non-harmful to them. When mothers fail to notify the employer on time, they would be delaying the risk assessment and it could potentially be dangerous depending on the type of work and sector they work in. Pregnancy and maternity discrimination can potentially be a disincentive for fathers who may want to take more time off to spend with the family for fear of being discriminated against for taking longer time off work. The Equality Act 2010 makes provisions against maternity and pregnancy discrimination. However, in line with the findings of the study conducted by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in 2016 pregnancy and maternity discrimination in the workplace persist. These findings demonstrate the deep-rooted cultural and gender discrimination engraved in the workplace. This discrimination would make it hard for SPL uptake to improve if employers do not change how they treat and perceive mothers in the workplace.

The findings also demonstrated that more women are being pushed to the culture of holding on and not letting go of their maternity leave. Some mothers are reluctant to share their maternity leave because they want to spend all their maternity leave with their baby bonding and watching them grow [42] but also avoiding the negativity they might face in the workplace on their return. However, some of their desire not to share the leave is because they do not feel they would be supported by their employer if they had to return to work early and, for example, start demanding resources to express breastmilk in the workplace for breastfeeding mothers or requesting flexible working to accommodate their work and family life. This problem is further compounded by the fact that there is no right to flexible working, merely a right to request. In some cases, mothers do not bother going through the process of requesting flexible working, they tend to reduce their working hours and go back to work on a part-time basis. This way they feel they can dedicate time to their child. This has a huge impact on the career of the mother, while simultaneously ensuring that the workplace continues to be considered less supportive towards mothers and women in general.

The final point that emerged from the findings was the desire to change cultural perception and workplace norms and practices. As more women enter the labour market taking up strategic roles and becoming breadwinners of their families, workplace practices need to change to reflect this change. Without the change most, parents 'fall back' into gender roles of mothers being the caregivers and fathers the breadwinners [43]. More fathers are expressing the desire to spend time with the family and to bond with their babies when they are born. While this desire is being expressed by the parents, workplaces need to proactively demonstrate their willingness to support both parents at work. As discussed above, some workplaces do not inform parents about the existence of SPL when they are notified about parents expecting a child which

has resulted in parents missing out on the opportunity simply because they were not aware of its existence. Fathers in countries like Norway where fathers have an independent SPL entitlement to the mother, still found that the workplace was not supportive of them taking all the leave that they were entitled to. Employers and work colleagues frowned at fathers taking longer leave [9]. This lesson from Norway tends to demonstrate that gender discrimination will continue to impact the uptake of SPL as long as the workplace norms and practices remained modeled on the male as a breadwinner.

6. Conclusion

The research aimed to examine how gender discrimination and cultural perceptions in the workplace could impact the uptake of SPL. Data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 parents (a mix of twelve mothers and eight fathers). The study found that most of the workplaces are still operating on the male as a breadwinner model, thereby having/making little or no adjustments to encourage mothers to share their maternity leave with their partners as SPL. While gender discrimination, maternity discrimination, and pregnancy discrimination are still key issues in the workplace, they have a negative impact on the decisions that parents make on SPL. Mothers feel unsupported in the workplace and may decide to take longer maternity as a break from work. This lack of support may make fathers feel they would be considered as less committed to their work if they were to take longer than two weeks off work as there is already concerns over employers' lack of support for fathers flexible working requests [29]. More fathers feel they need to be at work to provide for the family financially or they need to be at work to prove to their employers that they are committed employees. The research demonstrated a strong desire for change from both the mothers and the fathers. Mothers want to be valued in the workplace and be supported as they balance work and caring responsibilities. Some fathers also want a culture change so they can be able to spend time with the family when the baby is born and bond with the baby without the fear of being regarded as a less committed employee. For SPL uptake to improve there are key actions to be taken by both policymakers and employers to encourage parents to take SPL. Policymakers need to revise the SPL policy to give fathers an independent right like the Scandinavian countries [44] and to provide a better pay package to incentivise fathers to take SPL. However, as seen from the Norwegian example, a good policy must go with employer support to make the policy effective. Therefore, there are actions that employers must take that could break the decades of gender discrimination, build a positive and supportive workplace for parents which in turn will increase the uptake of SPL. Employers could proactively promote and encourage parents to take SPL by providing the workplace policy on SPL, explaining the practicalities of the policy to the parents, and providing examples or testimonials of people in the workplace that have taken SPL. Where the employer is enhancing maternity leave pay, consider enhancing SPL pay and paternity leave pay (if not enhancing these already).

Employers to provide a robust and safe space for pregnancy and maternity discrimination reporting systems. Employers should actively engage in decisions and activities that change gender stereotype in the workplace. A follow-up research is being conducted to accurately measure the impact of gender discrimination on parents' decision to take SPL and identify/compare workplace practices.

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